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**Religion, Ecology and Sustainable Development: Towards a Theology of Reconstruction**

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**ABSTRACT**

*For many years' science, engineering, policy, law, and economics were considered indispensable for understanding and resolving environmental problems. We now have abundant knowledge from these disciplines about environmental issues, but still not sufficient to engage in long-term change for the flourishing of the Earth community. Thus, there is a growing realization that religion, can make important contributions, in collaborating with science and policy, to address complex ecological issues in Africa in general, and Ghana in particular. In order to solve the ecological crisis, we need to develop new methods of thinking, to elaborate new moral and ethical values, and new patterns of behaviour. This study argues that one such method is through the theology of reconstruction. Source data for this work are mainly analysis of secondary data collection. The study concludes that through the theology of reconstruction for sustainable development, religion should fully consider divine-human-earth relations.*

**Keywords:** *Ethics and Religion, Ecology and Sustainable Development, Theology of Reconstruction, Environmental Concern and Greenhouse Effect.*

**Introduction**

It has generally been observed that religious life and the earth's ecology are inextricably linked and organically related. As such every human activity affects the earth, be it political, social, economic, cultural or religious. Lawrence E. Sullivan observes that one can hardly think of a natural system that has not been considerably altered, for better or worse, by human culture.<sup>1</sup> This culture has altered the natural phenomenon to the extent that the human community is in search of new and sustaining relationships to the earth amidst an environmental crisis that threatens the very existence of all life-forms on the planet. This is so alarming that the future of human life itself is threatened. One would ask, is the human a viable species on an endangered planet? In order that we would be able to solve the ecological crisis we need to develop new methods of thinking, to elaborate new moral and ethical values, and, no doubt, new patterns of behaviour. We need new social, moral, scientific, religious and ecological concepts, which should be determined by new conditions for the life of humans today and in the future. This is what the Theology of Reconstruction is all about. The purpose of this presentation therefore seeks to examine the concept of the Theology of Reconstruction in the light of Religion and Ecology and how they affect what has come to be known as Sustainable Development.

In recent times, environmental issues have become a major global concern. This is due to the prominence of a good environment to global security and human development. According to Folke and Gunderson, there are no ecosystems without people and no people who

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<sup>1</sup> Lawrence E. Sullivan., "Preface," in Dieter T. Hessel and Rosemary Radford Ruether (eds.), *Christianity and Ecology: Seeking the Well-Being of the Earth and Humans* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2000), xi.

do not depend on ecosystem functioning.<sup>2</sup> Emmanuel Asante also stresses that 'the human's life depends completely on the riches the earth conceals and the fertility of the soil.'<sup>3</sup> Human survival depends on a functioning ecosystems or environment. However, current global environmental challenges are raising new debate as to how human societies relate to the environment. Appiah-Opoku argues that development as a result of increasing globalization, population pressures, the introduction of formal education, and the spread of Christianity, are some of the challenges affecting the conservation of the natural environment in local communities.<sup>4</sup> Mike Anane observes that environmental degradation has become a topical issue with everyone realizing that the earth is gradually losing its capacity to sustain life.<sup>5</sup>

We live in an era in the history of nations when there is greater need than ever for coordinated action and responsibility in solving the ecological crisis on our hands. Environmental issues should not be destined to remain a side issue in religious, social, cultural, economic, and political decision making. Perhaps our most urgent task today is to persuade societies and communities to reconsider the way we treat the environment. There has been a growing realization in national governments and multilateral institutions that it is impossible to separate developmental issues from environmental issues. Many forms of development erode the environmental resources upon which they must be based, and environmental degradation can undermine economic development. These concerns were behind the establishment in 1983 of the WCED by the UN General Assembly.<sup>6</sup>

### **An Ecological Understanding**

Ecology is the study of relationships among organisms and between them and their environment. The primary concern is with the relationships between people, other organisms such as plants and animals, and the natural environment. As an academic discipline, ecology deals with populations, communities and ecosystems. It is therefore a bridge between the biological and the behavioural sciences. The term comes from two Greek words, *oikos*, meaning 'home', and *logos*, meaning 'understanding'.<sup>7</sup> Therefore 'ecology' means 'understanding our home or habitat'. This habitat is made up of several inhabitants, namely, plants, birds, fishes, animals, humans and other unidentified co-dwellers.

<sup>2</sup> Carl Folke & L. H. Gunderson, "Reconnecting to the biosphere: a socialecological renaissance," *Ecology and Society*, Vol. 17. No. 4 (2012): 55.

<sup>3</sup> Emmanuel Asante, "He Who Possesses the Land Possesses Divinity Spirituality and the Land from Biblical and African Perspectives," *Trinity Journal of Church and Theology*. Vol X1. Jan/July No. 1&2 (2001): 16-28.

<sup>4</sup> Seth Appiah-Opoku, "Indigenous Beliefs and Environmental Stewardship: A Rural Ghana Experience," *Journal of Cultural Geography*, Vol. 24. No. 2 (2007): 79-98. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/08873630709478212>. (Retrieved on 31st January 2014)

<sup>5</sup> Mike Anane "Implementing Agenda 21: Religion and Conservation in Ghana." 2010 <http://www.unngls.org/documents/publications.en/agenda21/12.htm> (Retrieved on 31<sup>st</sup> January 2014)

<sup>6</sup> The Brundtland Commission, formally the World Commission on Environment and Development (WCED), was convened by the United Nations in 1983. The commission was created to address growing concern "about the accelerating deterioration of the human environment and natural resources and the consequences of that deterioration for economic and social development." In establishing the commission, the UN General Assembly recognized that environmental problems were global in nature and determined that it was in the common interest of all nations to establish policies for sustainable development.

<sup>7</sup> <http://www.google.com.gh/search?hl=en&q=BRUNDTLAND+REPORT>  
<http://www.questia.com/PM.qst?a=o&d=102709832>

Again, the scientific study of the environment can be undertaken by dividing it into four segments: the atmosphere, hydrosphere (e.g. Oceans), lithosphere (e.g. Rocks, soil) and the biosphere (parts of the atmosphere, hydrosphere or lithosphere where life exists).

It is generally believed that environment and development are often regarded as unrelated, but the researcher's assumption is that environmental issues are integral to our social context. Thus, for example, deforestation in one part of Africa is not just a matter of tree loss leading to the destruction of a range of botanical species and a reduction in the extent to which carbon dioxide can be removed from the atmosphere. It is the harbinger of a whole range of ecological issues: loss of food supplies, drinking water and other essential commodities to people and animals living in a symbiotic relationship with the forests, an increase in malaria, and additional hardships for women, which invariably will affect the development of that area. No wonder the developing nations at the 1992 Earth Summit reacted with shock and anger to the bland arguments of the industrialized nations that they should grow more trees, primarily to mop up the excess carbon dioxide cause by the West's profligate lifestyles.<sup>8</sup>

### The Ecological Crisis

The beauty of the image of our planet from space has been described by Elizabeth A. Johnson as: "a marvelous photo of a blue marble swirled around with white clouds, evokes a profound sense of the earth as a community."<sup>9</sup> This imagery depicts the aesthetic beauty of our one and only earth. In spite of its beauty from outer space, the earth is seriously at risk of depletion and extinction. The human community is gradually destroying the earth community through their human activities. The renewed eco-theologian Thomas Berry submits that:

The changes that is taking place on the earth and in our minds one of the greatest changes ever to take place in human affairs, perhaps the greatest, since what we are talking about is not simply another historical change or cultural modification, but a change of geological an biological as well as psychological order of magnitude.<sup>10</sup>

According to him the ecological crisis is multi-dimensional, and multinational. The very essence of life on earth is at risk. In their Series Foreword to the book Christianity and Ecology: Seeking the Well-Being of Earth and Humans, Mary Evelyn Tucker and John Grim states *inter alia*:

From resources depletion and species extinction to pollution overload and toxic surplus, the planet is struggling against unprecedented assaults... aggravated by population explosion, industrial growth, technological manipulation, and military proliferation... unknown by the human community. From many accounts the basic elements which sustain life; sufficient water, clean air, and arable land, are all at risk.<sup>11</sup>

<sup>8</sup> In 1992 the UN Conference on Environment and Development was held in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil. Popularly known as the Earth Summit, this meeting was the largest gathering of world leaders in history. The conference produced two major treaties. The first was an agreement for nations to voluntarily reduce emission of gases leading to global warming, and the second was a pact on biodiversity requiring countries to develop plans to protect endangered species and habitats. <http://www.un.org/earthsummit/>

<sup>9</sup> Elizabeth A. Johnson, *Christianity and Ecology*: 3.

<sup>10</sup> Thomas Berry, *The Dream of the Earth* (San Francisco: Sierra Club Books, 1990), 11

<sup>11</sup> Mary Evelyn Tucker and John Grim "Series Foreword," in *Christianity and Ecology*, xv.

The point is that this crisis cuts across all aspect of human life, and affects human existence. Ghana, for example, is plagued with several environmental challenges including poor sanitation, air pollution, deforestation, water pollution, noise pollution, indiscriminate disposal of plastic and liquid waste, and so on. This litany of environmental problems has negative impact on the already falling economy as well as human capital. It is not only an economic, political or social crisis, but also moral as well as spiritual crisis, which requires a broader philosophical and religious understanding of ourselves as creatures of nature, embedded in life cycles and dependent on ecosystems.<sup>12</sup> There is the need to reverse this crisis or halt the degradation for the sake of our future generation, hence the need for a theology of reconstruction, which includes awareness creation, education, attitudinal change, and other positive interventions. To reinforcement this point further, Elizabeth A. Johnson states *inter alia*:

We need to realize that the destruction of this vibrant, complex natural world is tantamount to sacrilege. And we need to fathom that the human species is embedded as an intrinsic, interdependent part of the magnificence of this universe, not as lords of the manor but kin in the community of life, charged with beings sisters and brothers, friends and lovers, mothers and fathers, priest and prophets, cocreators and children of the earth that is God's good creation.<sup>13</sup>

The task of reconstructing our broken ecological walls is multidisciplinary and multi-professional. It must be done through economic, technological, social, cultural, political, as well as religious categories. The environment does not exist as a sphere separate from human actions, ambitions, and needs. The "environment" is where we all live; and "development" is what we all do in attempting to improve our lot within that abode. The two are inseparable.

### **Some Reasons for Environmental Concern**

Emmanuel Obeng observes that creation is groaning...awaiting regeneration. The causes of this groaning are both natural and cultural. According to him the groaning situation can be deduced from the problem of poverty, geographical factors, and increase in population, rural-urban migration, ethnic factionalism, power strife, and corruption.<sup>14</sup> Environmental stress has often been seen as the result of the growing demand on scarce resources and the pollution generated by the rising living standards of the relatively affluent. But poverty itself pollutes the environment, creating environmental stress in a different way. Those who are poor and hungry will often destroy their immediate environment in order to survive. They will cut down forests; their livestock will overgraze grasslands; they will overuse marginal land; and in growing numbers they will crowd into congested cities. The cumulative effect of these changes is so far-reaching as to make poverty itself a major global scourge. If people destroy vegetation in order to get land, food, fodder, fuel, or timber, the soil is no longer protected. Rain creates surface runoff, and the soil erodes. When the soil is gone, no water is retained and the land can

<sup>12</sup> Mary Evelyn Tucker & John Grim, "Series Foreword," xvi

<sup>13</sup> Elizabeth Johnson. "Losing and Finding Creation in the Christian Tradition," in *Christianity and Ecology*, 18.

<sup>14</sup> Emmanuel Adow Obeng, "Healing the Groaning Creation in Africa," in Mary N. Getui & Emmanuel Adow Obeng (ed.), *Theology of Reconstruction* (Nairobi: Acton Publishers, 2003), 10-26.

no longer produce enough food, fodder, fuel, or timber, so people need to turn to new land and start the process all over again. The number of people living in slums and shanty towns is rising, not falling.<sup>15</sup> A growing number lack access to clean water and sanitation and hence are prey to the diseases that arise from this lack.

### **Population Growth**

It has been known for centuries that world population is growing. The UN predicts that world population will approach 8 billion by the year 2015.<sup>16</sup> Stott cautions that the earth cannot sustain a larger population which, owing to poverty and even starvation, is forced to use its resources with only short-term gain in mind, often making long-term destruction inevitable.<sup>17</sup> Environmental stresses also arise from more traditional forms of production. More land has been cleared for settled cultivation. Interventions in the water cycles have increased greatly. Massive dams, most of them built after 1960, impound a large proportion of the river flow. Stott observes that the wealthy consume too much and are wasteful, while the poor are preoccupied with their immediate survival, rather than with the long-term care of the planet.<sup>18</sup>

### **Greenhouse Effect**

The 'greenhouse effect', one such threat to life support systems, springs directly from increased resource use. The burning of fossil fuels and the cutting and burning of forests release carbon dioxide (CO<sub>2</sub>). The accumulation in the atmosphere of CO<sub>2</sub> and certain other gases traps solar radiation near the Earth's surface, causing global warming. This could cause sea level rises large enough to inundate many low lying coastal cities and river deltas. It could also drastically upset national and international agricultural production and trade systems. The alarming rate at which the Earth's surface is being denuded of its natural vegetative cover seems to indicate that the world may soon become devoid of trees through clearing for human developments. In Ghana for example, we see on daily basis loads of charcoal being conveyed from the countryside to the cities. Pollutants such as human waste, emission from combusting engines are all causes of climate change. Energy consumption worldwide is breaking record after record. Since the burning of oil and coal produce greenhouse gases, some governments are taking a closer look at nuclear power as a cleaner alternative. But it too present challenges.<sup>19</sup>

### **Ozone Layer**

Another threat arises from the depletion of the atmospheric ozone layer by gases released during the production of foam and the use of refrigerants and aerosols. A substantial loss of such ozone could have catastrophic effects on human and livestock health and on some life forms at the base of the marine food chain. The 1986 discovery of a hole in the ozone layer above the Antarctic suggests the possibility of a more rapid depletion than previously

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<sup>15</sup> Recently it was in the news that the government wants to decongest the metropolitan cities of slums and other illegal structures. A typical example is the Sodom and Gomorrah settlement in Accra. These slums often create filth and flooding within the cities.

<sup>16</sup> John Stott, *New Issues Facing Christians Today* (London: Marshall Pickering, 1999), 124.

<sup>17</sup> Stott, *New Issues Facing Christians Today*, 125.

<sup>18</sup> Stott, *New Issues Facing Christians Today*, 125.

<sup>19</sup> <http://www.gbcghana.com/news/28874detail.html>

suspected.<sup>20</sup> A variety of air pollutants are killing trees and lakes and damaging buildings and cultural treasures, close to and sometimes thousands of miles from points of emission. The acidification of the environment threatens large areas of Europe and North America. The loss of forests could bring in its wake disastrous erosion, siltation, floods, and local climatic change. Air pollution damage is also becoming evident in some newly industrialized countries.<sup>21</sup>

### Facts About the Ecological Crisis

Before any assessment or consideration of possible action can be done, it is necessary to gain a clear picture of the magnitude and complexity of the challenge ahead of us. We shall focus on climate change as part of the ecological crisis. The following is a quick summary of some of the key scientific facts on the environmental and social dimension of climate change.<sup>22</sup> This is being done within the main topic of Religion, Ecology and Sustainable Development towards a Theology of Reconstruction. Climate change in its deepest sense needs to be understood as an ethical issue that raises serious questions about how we define our role and responsibility towards a Theology of Reconstruction. Climate change is already taking place. Available statistics indicate that from 1906 to 2005, global average temperatures have increased by 0.74 °C (23F). This rate of global warming has increased massively from the 1970s to the present. This has led to a rise of the global sea level and a higher increased frequency of extreme weather events such as heat waves, droughts, floods and hurricanes.

Eleven of the warmest years on record have occurred during the last twelve years and recent findings indicate that the year 2007 was the second warmest year in a century. Global warming is caused by human activity: it is now unequivocally accepted by the world's scientific community that human activities intensify the natural greenhouse effect by emitting heat-trapping gases such as carbon dioxide (CO<sub>2</sub>),<sup>23</sup> methane (CH<sub>4</sub>),<sup>24</sup> and nitrous oxide (N<sub>2</sub>O).<sup>25</sup> Between 1970 and 2004, global greenhouse gas emissions have increased by 70% due to human activity. Atmospheric concentration of CO<sub>2</sub> and CH<sub>4</sub> in 2005 exceeded by far the natural range over the last 650,000 years. By 2100, global temperature could increase by 1.1 °C to 6.4 °C, depending on the international community's ability and willingness to effectively mitigate greenhouse gas emissions. As a comparison, the last ice age was about 5 °C cooler than our current climate. Never before in human history have, we experienced a climatic temperature change of this magnitude.

### Environmental Challenges

Scientists warn that destabilised ecosystem could react with nonpredictable, abrupt and nonlinear events with catastrophic consequences for humans and the environment. Scientists are also forecasting a total disappearance of the Arctic sea ice at a much earlier point in time.

<sup>20</sup> <http://www.un-documents.net/ocf-01.htm.fn8>

<sup>21</sup> Air pollution is a threat to cities like Mexico, and Czech Republic.

<sup>22</sup> Philip Lee (Ed.), 'Facts about Climate Change', *Media Development: Environmental Communication*, Vol. LVI (Toronto: WACC, 2/2009), 8, [http://www.waccglobal.org/wacc/publications/media\\_development](http://www.waccglobal.org/wacc/publications/media_development)

<sup>23</sup> Colourless odourless gas: a heavy colourless odourless atmospheric gas. Source: respiration, combustion. Use: during photosynthesis, in refrigeration, carbonated drinks, fire extinguishers.

<sup>24</sup> Fuel gas: a colourless odourless flammable gas that is the main constituent of natural gas. Use: as fuel.

<sup>25</sup> Sweet-smelling gas: a colourless non-flammable sweet-smelling sweettasting gas. Use: anaesthetic.

They had projected that by the latter half of the 21<sup>st</sup> the Arctic sea will be icefree, but certain processes have made them drastically reconsidered their previous estimates. Studies have shown that methane emissions from the Arctic region have increased by 58% between 1974 and 2000, emitting a greenhouse gas 20 times more potent than carbon dioxide. Climate change leads to a massive meltdown of glaciers and inland ice. As glaciers retreat, lakes form, which accumulate increasing amounts of water, putting the downstream communities at risk of glacier lake outburst floods.<sup>26</sup> Global warming has devastating impacts on the world's ecosystems and biodiversity. For many species, climate systems are changing more rapidly than they can adapt. According to the Millennium Ecosystem Assessment, the current rate of extinction of species is up to 1,000 times higher than the fossil record indicates. Climate change is contributing massively to this problem.<sup>27</sup>

### **Ethical and Religious Consequences**

Climate change can be seen as metaphor of the fractured relationship between human societies and God's creation, the broader earth system of which we are part. Not only will people suffer as a result of climate change, but many ecosystems will be disrupted and species threatened.<sup>28</sup> These raise both religious and social issues especially for the majority of Africans who are also poor. As such African Theologians must be concerned about these issues because the poor are bearing the brunt of these changes.

Firstly, their vulnerability to climate change is higher and their capacity to adapt is lower, because they lack the means for protecting themselves from the harm caused by the rising seas, increased natural hazards and changes in rainfall patterns.

Secondly, agricultural production and food security is affected. Changes in temperature, rainfall patterns and water availability have long-term impacts on the viability and productivity of agricultural systems. It is estimated that by the FAO that an expected increase in average world temperatures of 1 to 3<sup>o</sup>C would lead to a drop in cereal production in more than 65 countries accounting for half the world's population African countries included.

Thirdly, during the past few years, the world's hunger for alternative energy resources has turned to the booming market of bio fuels, which made the prices for corn, soybean, palm oil, sugarcane, and other grains almost double in 2006. This trend is aggravating the adverse effects of global warming on agricultural output and is leading to a competition between the world's food energy markets. Ethically this competition is making the poor the weaker side.

Fourthly, rising sea levels and exposure to climate disasters is another issue of concern. According to UNDP, some 262 million people were affected by climate disasters from 2000 to 2004, over 98% of them in the developing world. The fact is that the risk of being affected by a natural disaster in a developing country is almost 80 times higher than in the developed world.

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<sup>26</sup> A similar example is the recent floods in the Northern part of Ghana due to the opening of Bagre Dam in water levels from Burkina Faso in 2010

<sup>27</sup> Philip Lee (Ed.), *Media Development: Environmental Communication*, 8-9

<sup>28</sup> David G. Hallman, "Climate Change: Ethics, Justice, and Sustainable Community," in *Christianity and Ecology*, 453-454



The last issue that should be of much concern to all African Theologians is in the area of human health. Global warming is expanding the reach of mosquitoes and carriers of vector-borne diseases such as Malaria and Dengue-Fever.<sup>29</sup> These human induced changes, which affect the sanctity of life, are severely felt by the poor, thereby having a long-term effect on sustainable development. Mary E. Tucker and John Grim stipulate that for most part we have developed in the world religions certain ethical prohibitions regarding homicide and restraints concerning genocide and suicide, but none for biocide and genocide.<sup>30</sup> It is believed that African Theologians through the theology of reconstruction will be in a better position to demand justice for the poor and for the earth community.

### **Some Religious Perspective on Ecology**

One would ask what religion has got to do with the ecological crisis. What is the role of religion in this crisis? Why should religious people be interested about the environment? It must be pointed out that religion helps us to shape our attitudes toward nature in both conscious and unconscious ways. The traditions of Judaism, Christianity and Islam have created mostly a dominantly human-centred morality. Because of this anthropocentric stand, nature has been viewed as secondary and not part of the spiritual, but material to be used by human. The concept that God is above and transcend from nature has given rise to this crisis. Thomas Berry believes that this anthropocentrism is largely consequent on our failure to think of ourselves as species. We think of ourselves as ethnic, cultural, language, or economic groups. We seldom consider ourselves as species among species.<sup>31,32</sup>

It has been argued that there are no environmental ethics found in the world religions. This notion is wrong. According to Mary Evelyn Tucker and John Grim, "religion provides the basic interpretive stories of who we are, what nature is, where we have come from, and where we are going."<sup>33</sup> This understanding of religion gives us a general perspective of society, including issues of ecology. Through religion, we are able to understand ethically how we should treat other species and how to relate to nature. This is based on the assumption by Lynn White that "what people do about their ecology depend on what they think about themselves in relation to things around them. Human ecology is deeply conditioned by beliefs about our nature and destiny, that is, by religion."<sup>34</sup> Christians believe that the earth belongs to God and everything in it. Stott reasons that God has given us dominion over earth. This dominion is a co-operative dominion as well as a delegated, and therefore a responsible dominion.<sup>35</sup>

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<sup>29</sup> A tropical disease caused by a virus that is transmitted by mosquitoes and marked by high fever and severe muscle and joint pains. Dengue fever occurs in many tropical and sub-tropical areas in Asia, Africa, Central and South America.

<sup>30</sup> Tucker and Grim, "Series Foreword," xxvii

<sup>31</sup> Thomas Berry, *The Dream of the Earth* (San Francisco: Sierra Club Books, 1987), 21

<sup>32</sup> ), 21

<sup>33</sup> Tucker & Grim, "Series Foreword," xvi.

<sup>34</sup> Tucker & Grim, "Series Foreword," xvi.

<sup>35</sup> Stott, *New Issues Facing Christians Today*, 131-133.

In Islamic perspective, the earth is mentioned some 453 times in the Qur'an, whereas sky and the heavens are mentioned only about 320 times. Islam does understand the earth to be subservient to humankind but it should not be administered and exploited irresponsibly.<sup>36</sup> Additionally, the religious views at the basis of indigenous traditional religion involve respect for the source of food, clothing, and shelter that nature provides. Gratitude to the creator and to the spiritual forces in creation is at the heart of most traditional religion. According to Mary E. Tucker and John Grim, the ritual calendars of many indigenous peoples are carefully coordinated with seasonal events such as the sound of returning birds, the blooming of certain plants, the movements of the sun, and the changes of the moon.<sup>36</sup> In the Akan indigenous religious thought, the strict observance of 'Sabbaths for farming' was a way of preserving the ecology. Certain days were set aside for the land to rest from any form of farming activities. The people saw that it was a taboo to go to the farm on such 'evil days'. Peter Kwasi Sarpong believes that without such taboos, such very important commodities would gradually disappear.<sup>37</sup>

### What is Sustainable Development?

Sustainable development has been defined in many ways, but the most frequently quoted definition is from *Our Common Future*, also known as the Brundtland Report: According to the Report,<sup>38</sup> "*Sustainable development is development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs.*" It contains within it two key concepts:

- *The concept of **needs**, in particular the essential needs of the world's poor, to which overriding priority should be given; and*
- *The idea of **limitations** imposed by the state of technology and social organization on the environment's ability to meet present and future needs.*

All definitions of sustainable development require that we see the world as a system, a system that connects space; and a system that connects them. When one thinks of the world as a system over space, one grows to understand that air pollution from North America affects air quality in Durban, and that pesticides sprayed in Argentina could harm fish stocks off the west coast in Ghana. And when one thinks of the world as a system over time, one start to realize that the decisions our grandparents made about how to farm the land continue to affect agricultural practice today; and the economic policies we endorse today will have an impact on urban poverty when our children are adults. We also understand that quality of life is a system, too. It's good to be physically healthy, but what if one is poor and don't have access to education? It's good to have a secure income, but what if the air in one part of the world is unclean? And it's good to have freedom of religious expression, but what if you can't feed your family?<sup>39</sup>

<sup>36</sup> <http://fore.research.yale.edu/religion/> <sup>36</sup> Tucker and Grim, "Series Foreword," xxvii.

<sup>37</sup> Peter K. Sarpong, *Peoples Differ* (Legon-Accra: Sub-Sahara Publishers, 2002), 105.

<sup>38</sup> <http://www.iisd.org/sd/>

<sup>39</sup> <http://www.iisd.org/sd/>

### The Concept of Sustainable Development

According to the *Brundtland's Report* the concept of sustainable development provides a framework for the integration of environment policies and development strategies. The pursuit of sustainable development requires changes in the domestic and international policies of every nation; it should be seen as a global objective. Sustainable development seeks to meet the needs and aspirations of the present without compromising the ability to meet those of the future.<sup>40</sup> A world in which poverty and inequity are endemic will always be prone to ecological and other crises. Sustainable development therefore requires meeting the basic needs of all and extending to all the opportunity to satisfy their aspirations for a better life. Meeting essential needs depends in part on achieving full growth potential, and sustainable development clearly requires economic growth in places where such needs are not being met. Again, sustainable development requires that societies meet human needs both by increasing productive potential and by ensuring equitable opportunities for all.

A society may in many ways compromise its ability to meet the essential needs of its people in the future - by overexploiting resources, for example. The direction of technological developments may solve some immediate problems but lead to even greater ones. Large sections of the population may be marginalized by ill-considered development. Settled agriculture, the diversion of watercourses, the extraction of minerals, the emission of heat and noxious gases into the atmosphere, commercial forests, and genetic manipulation are all examples of human intervention in natural systems during the course of development. At a minimum, sustainable development must not endanger the natural systems that support life on Earth: the atmosphere, the waters, the soils, and the living beings. As for non-renewable resources, like fossil fuels and minerals, their use reduces the stock available for future generations. Thus, land should not be degraded beyond reasonable recovery. With minerals and fossil fuels, the rate of depletion and the emphasis on recycling and economy of use should be calibrated to ensure that the resource does not run out before acceptable substitutes are available. Sustainable development requires that the rate of depletion of non-renewable resources should foreclose as few future options as possible.<sup>41</sup>

Development tends to simplify ecosystems and to reduce their diversity of species. And species, once extinct, are not renewable. The loss of plant and animal species can greatly limit the options of future generations; so sustainable development requires the conservation of plant and animal species. So-called free goods like air and water are also resources. The raw materials and energy of production processes are only partly converted to useful products. The rest comes out as wastes. Sustainable development requires that the adverse impacts on the quality of air, water, and other natural elements are minimized so as to sustain the ecosystem's overall integrity. In essence, sustainable development is a process of change in which the exploitation of resources, the direction of investments, the orientation of technological development; and institutional change are all in harmony and enhance both current and future potential to meet human needs and aspirations.<sup>42</sup> In a nutshell, the concept of Sustainable

<sup>40</sup> <http://www.iisd.org/sd/>

<sup>41</sup> <http://www.google.com.gh/search?hl=en&q=BRUNDTLAND REPORT>

<sup>42</sup> *BRUNDTLAND REPORT*

development is a way of reconstructing the economic development agendas of industries and nations. Next, we would want to examine how religion can help in this direction under the concept of theology of reconstruction.

### **Towards a Theology of Reconstruction**

The burden of solving the ecological crisis facing humanity lies in the theological metaphor of re-construction. This metaphor depicts the image of the biblical Nehemiah in rebuilding our broken ecological walls for sustainable development in our time. Lynn White notes that what we do about ecology depends on our ideas of the man-nature relationship. More science and more technology are not going to get us out of the present ecological crisis until we find a new religion, or rethink our old one.<sup>43</sup> This new religion or rethinking is to be found in the Theology of Reconstruction. Thomas Berry aptly suggests a programme of re-inhabiting the earth in a human manner.<sup>44</sup> According to Berry, we must honour the earth by return to the earth community as part of our reconstruction. We should properly introduce our children to the world in which we live, to the trees and grasses and flowers, to the birds and insects and the various animals that roam over the land, to the entire range of the natural phenomena.<sup>45</sup> And in the view of Anderson, the best place to do this is at the Christian camps that often provide extensive outdoor educational programmes.<sup>46</sup> As a way out of this ecological crisis, Obeng also suggests a Theology of Creation as one of the blocks for the reconstruction.<sup>47</sup> He posits that the Theology of Creation has to be shaped by a radical attentiveness to the experience of Creation itself. In other words, the earth should not be seen as a mere object of human ownership and unqualified manipulation. Theology of creation must help us to rediscover the biblical insights which points to creation as infused with the Spirit of God:

Even birds and animals have much they could teach you; ask the creatures of earth and sea for their wisdom. All of them know that the LORD's made them.

It is God who directs the lives of his creatures; everyone's life is in his power.<sup>48</sup>

For a meaningful theology of creation in Africa, Obeng suggests that the Christian Church must become a body through which healing the groaning creation can take place.<sup>48</sup> To him, these Christian churches must become 'Creation Awareness Centres' to educate congregation members on their individual responsibilities towards their neighbours and the environment.<sup>49</sup> In addition, as 'Creation Awareness Centre', the churches [religious bodies] have to be very vocal in their condemnation of the ills of injustice, and exploitation. In Ghana, the Presbyterian Church of Ghana and other religious bodies have also been adding their voices on the issue of solving the ecological crisis by calling on the various governments in Ghana on the need to

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<sup>43</sup> Lynn White, "The Theological roots of the Ecological Crisis," in Robin Gill (ed.), *A TextBook of Christian Ethics* (London: T & T Clark, 1995), Extract 17.26, 416.

<sup>44</sup> Berry, *The Dream of the Earth*, 12

<sup>45</sup> Berry, *The Dream of the Earth*, 13

<sup>46</sup> Kerby, Anderson, *Christian Ethics in Plain Language* (Nashville: Nelson Reference & Electronic, 2005), 187.

<sup>47</sup> Emmanuel Adow Obeng, *Theology of Reconstruction*, 19. <sup>48</sup> Job 12: 7-10 (KJV)

<sup>48</sup> I would even go further to include all religious bodies.

<sup>49</sup> Adow Obeng, "Healing the Groaning Creation in Africa," 21.

protecting the environment through the issuing of resolutions, statements and communiqués.<sup>50</sup> These are the Churches contribution of reconstructing the broken walls of Ghana's ecology. At the international ecumenical level, the WCC and her member churches are making contributions to the discussion. The world body is emphasizing on the indispensably interconnection between ecological sustainability and social justice. They are not only calling for “efficiency revolution, in terms of our use of energy, but sufficient revolution, that our consumption-oriented societies must be challenged to reflect on what is really enough, or sufficient, to provide a good quality of life.”<sup>51</sup>

Mugambi also submits that the Church [religion], as a social institution in Africa, remains the most accessible medium of communication, because it serves as the bridge between the past and the future.<sup>52</sup> Mugambi seems to be saying that religious people have the task of effecting societal change, must be prophetic in our preaching and teaching. We should use our churches as a medium of change. We should preach, and teach about issues of the environment concerns. The church must be an agency of change.

### Stewardship

Religion must help humans to be good stewards of creation. God's command to the newly created couple in creation story, is seen by many commentators as a key text in re-shaping the human-earth relations, Gen 1: 28:

And God blessed them, and God said unto them, Be fruitful, and multiply, and replenish the earth, and subdue it: and have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the fowl of the air, and over every living thing that moveth upon the earth (KJV).

Margaret G. Gecaga argues that this mandate is far from being the warrant for domination and exploitation, but rather, it suggests that there is a special role and responsibility for humans towards the rest of creation.<sup>53</sup> According to her, they are the viceroys<sup>55</sup> of God. Emmanuel Asante submits that, 'the human, created in God's image and placed in creation, is a symbol of God's ownership of all created things. As God's image, the human is a steward of God in God's creation.'<sup>54</sup> The idea of humans being stewards must put humans in harmony with nature. Towards a theology of reconstruction suggests stewardships of accountability to God for the way we manage this world. It also suggests an active and creative role in respect of the earth community for which we have been given responsibility.

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<sup>50</sup> *Cry Justice, A compilation of Messages, Addresses, Resolutions, Statements and Communiqués*, P.C.G.: Public Relations Unit

<sup>51</sup> David, G. Hallman, 'Climate Change: Ethics, Justice, and Sustainable Community', in *Christianity and Ecology*,. 466

<sup>52</sup> J. N. K. Mugambi, *From Liberation to Reconstruction* (Nairobi: East Africa Educational Publishers Ltd, 1995),. 50

<sup>53</sup> Margaret G. Gacega, "Creative Stewardship for the New Earth," in Mary N. Getui & Emmanuel Adow Obeng (eds.) *Theology of Reconstruction*, 37 <sup>55</sup> Governor representing sovereign in colony: a governor who represents a sovereign in a province, colony, or Country.

<sup>54</sup> Emmanuel Asante, *Stewardship: Essays on Ethics of Stewardship* (Accra: Wilas Press Limited, 1999), 79

As part of the reconstruction agenda, Eugene Wangiri calls for a return to African spirituality as one of the building blocks for the broken walls of our ecological crisis. She draws insights from the Aembu concept of Urumwe, which signifies oneness and harmony with the Creator and with other creatures. According to her Urumwe has been breached and there is the need to restore it, not in part but as a whole, the natural that is green cover, the air, the soil, the water and animals.<sup>55</sup> Kerby Anderson suggests the following as part of the reconstructing the ecological concerns walls for individuals and churches:

- Christians should study what the Bible says about Stewardship of Resources.
- Churches [and other religious bodies] should integrate biblical [scriptural] concepts about creation in preaching and teaching.
- Parents should see to it that their children are educated properly about the environment.
- Christians and other religious people should practice sound ecological principles, including such thing as recycling, which helps reduce the amount of trash.<sup>56</sup>

### Conclusion and a Way Forward

In concluding this presentation, one would remark that Religion has traditionally concentrated on the divine-human and human-human relations. But the challenge now is that through the theology of reconstruction for sustainable development, religion should fully consider divine-human-earth relations. This assertion is supported by Elizabeth A Johnson in saying that theology [including the theology of reconstruction] must deal with humanity and the natural world as creation in relation to God. This, according to her forms a metaphysical trinity. Take one away and understanding of the other two becomes incomplete.<sup>57</sup> White also notes that 'since the roots of our trouble are so religious, the remedy must also be essentially religious... we must rethink and refeel our nature and destiny.'<sup>58</sup>

One would aptly agree with Elizabeth A. Johnson that whatever our sub-disciplines, we must develop religious thought and ethical action having a tangible and comprehensive ecological dimension.<sup>59</sup> Towards a Theology of Reconstruction must also bring back balance, harmony and beauty of what has been destroyed in the world.<sup>60</sup> In other words, every religious persuasion should not only end at formulating policies on ecological reconstruction, but be evident in our Praxis, that is blending reflection with action. We must have a practical, tangible programme of action in solving the ecological crisis for sustainable development. Towards a Theology of Reconstructing the ecological crisis calls African Theologians to be part of the solution; by exposing the dangers of the crisis through their, Koinonia (fellowship), Diakonia (community service) Leiturgia (worship), Kerygma (preaching) and Didache (teaching),<sup>61</sup> and not part of the problem; by keeping mute.

<sup>55</sup> Eugene Wangiri, "Urumwe Spirituality and the Environment," in Mary N. Getui & Emmanuel Adow Obeng (eds.), *Theology of Reconstruction*, 71-88

<sup>56</sup> Kerby Anderson, *Christian Ethics in Plain Language* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2005), 186-187

<sup>57</sup> Johnson, *Christianity and Ecology*, 6.

<sup>58</sup> White, "The Theological roots of the Ecological Crisis," 417.

<sup>59</sup> White, "The Theological roots of the Ecological Crisis," 18.

<sup>60</sup> Gecaga, "Creative Stewardship for a New Earth," 35.

<sup>61</sup> Maria, Harris., *Fashion Me a People: Curriculum in the Church* (Westminster: John Knox Press, 1989),16.

The ecological crisis poses a challenge to the whole global community. National boundaries have become so porous that traditional distinctions between matters of local, national, and international significance have become blurred. Ecosystems do not respect national boundaries. Water pollution moves through shared rivers, lakes, and seas. The atmosphere carries air pollution over vast distances. Major accidents-particularly those at nuclear reactors or at plants or warehouses containing toxic materials - can have widespread regional effects.<sup>62</sup> I would finally agree with Hallman in saying that Religion has significant contributions to offer and responsibilities in which to be actively engaged. It has important role to play in reconstructing the broken walls of our ecology in the pursuit of sustainable development for all humans in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.<sup>63</sup> We should strenuously avoid wastefulness and greed, not only out of solidarity with the poor, but also out of respect for the living environment.<sup>64</sup> In order that we would be able to solve the ecological crisis I believe that we need to develop new methods of thinking, to elaborate new moral and ethical values, and, no doubt, new patterns of behaviour. We need new social, moral, scientific, religious and ecological concepts, which should be determined by new conditions for the life of humans today and in the future.

Human progress has always depended on our technical ingenuity and a capacity for cooperative action. These qualities have often been used constructively to achieve development and environmental progress: in air and water pollution control, for example, and in increasing the efficiency of material and energy use. Many countries have increased food production and reduced population growth rates. Some technological advances, particularly in medicine, have been widely shared. But this is not enough. Failures to manage the environment and to sustain development threaten to overwhelm all countries. From the above discussion one would say that Environment and development are not separate challenges; they are inescapably linked. Development cannot subsist upon a deteriorating environmental resource base; in the same way, environment cannot be protected when growth leaves out the costs of environmental destruction. These problems cannot be treated separately by fragmented institutions and policies. They are linked in a complex system of cause and effect. One would ask, how long can we, as a society, go on and safely pretend that the environment is not the economy, or religious, is not health, is not the prerequisite to development, is not recreation?

First, environmental stresses are linked one to another. For example, deforestation, by increasing run off, accelerates soil erosion and siltation of rivers and lakes. Air pollution and acidification play their part in killing forests and lakes. Such links mean that several different problems must be tackled simultaneously. And success in one area, such as forest protection, can improve chances of success in another area, such as soil conservation.

Second, environmental stresses and patterns of economic development are linked one to another. Thus agricultural policies may lie at the root of land, water, and forest degradation. Sustainable development and ecology must be completely integrated in decision making. It must be pointed out that development is not just about the production of wealth, and ecology

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<sup>62</sup> An example is what happened recently in Burkina Faso. The opening of Bagre Dam in that country resulted in flooding and that affected the northern part of Ghana in 2010.

<sup>63</sup> Hallman, in *Christianity and Ecology*, 467.

<sup>64</sup> Stott, *New Issues Facing Christians Today*, 142.

is not just about the protection of nature; they are both equally relevant for improving the lot of humankind.

Environmental and developmental problems are linked to many social, cultural, religious and political factors. For example, the rapid population growth that has so profound an impact on the environment and on development in many regions is driven partly by such factors as the status of women in society and other cultural values. Also, environmental stress and uneven development can increase social tensions. It could be argued that the distribution of power and influence within society lies at the heart of most environmental and developmental challenges. Hence new approaches must involve programmes of social development, particularly to improve the position of women in society, to protect vulnerable groups, and to promote local participation in decision making.



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